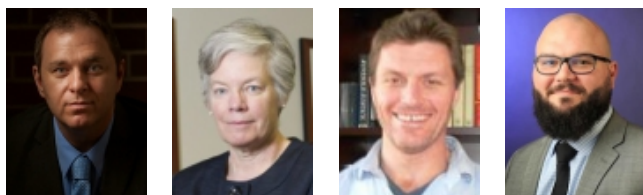


White supremacy can be addictive, and leaving it behind can be like kicking a drug habit.



The 2016 election and the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, earlier this year have focused the attention of many on to the resurgence of far-right extremism and radicalization. In new research based on interviews with former white supremacists, [Pete Simi](#), [Kathleen Blee](#), [Matthew DeMichele](#) and [Steven Windisch](#) find that many

of those involved in such movements consider themselves as having been “addicted” to white supremacy. They write that the totalizing lifestyle and extreme hatred-based identity associated with white supremacy may explain why former white supremacists feel they are addicts.

The tragic violence in Charlottesville, Virginia in August prompted many to ask questions about the resurgence of far-right extremism and how individuals become radicalized into these movements. Even before Charlottesville, the 2016 presidential election helped cast a spotlight on the “alt-right’s” [efforts](#) to rebrand white supremacy while appealing to a younger and more tech savvy generation. Far less attention, however, has been devoted to understanding what happens when people leave white supremacist hate groups and the challenges they may encounter.

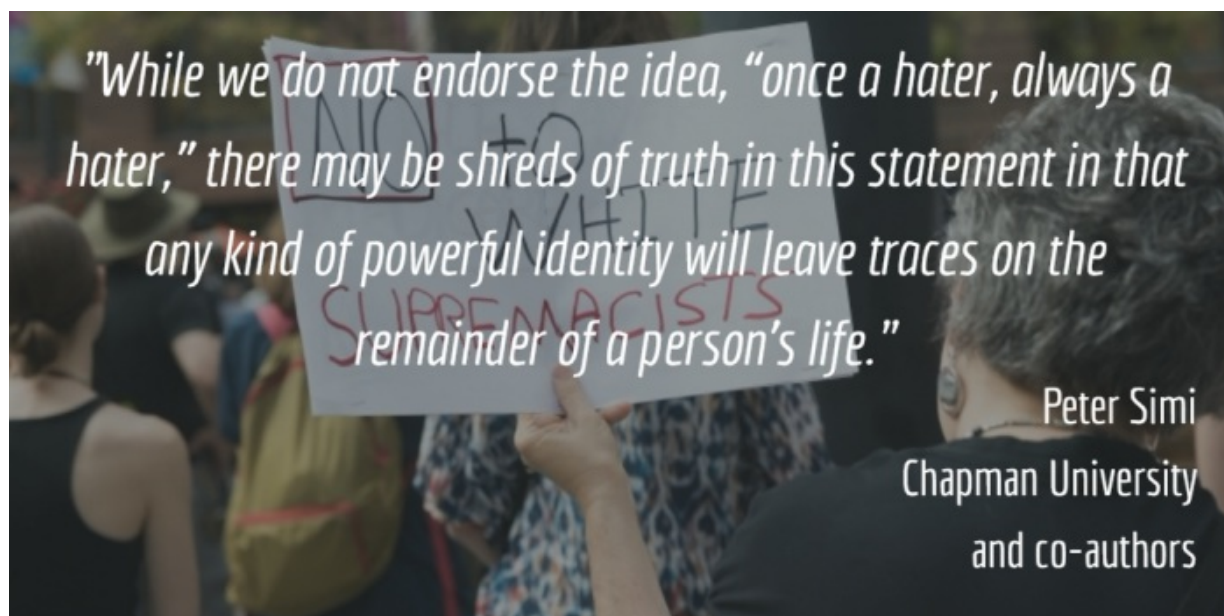
Does leaving hate behind involve a recovery process that mimics what substance users and other types of addicts’ experience? Based on extensive life history interviews with 89 former US white supremacists, we find that a substantial portion of our interview subjects report a difficult time shaking their former thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions, and, in many cases, come to think of themselves as being “addicted” to white supremacy.

On the one hand, conventional wisdom suggests white supremacists are entirely consumed by hatred where the prospect of change seems unlikely (“once a hater, always a hater”). In this sense, being addicted to hate might make sense. On the other hand, [previous studies](#) have [noted](#) the high burn-out rate among members of the white supremacist movement and the substantial retention efforts initiated by various groups to sustain participation. The question is not whether people can leave white supremacist hate groups as they clearly do, but, rather, what happens after they leave?

White supremacy has a long political, economic, and social history that permeates US institutions and culture. Our focus on the personal consequences of white supremacy is not an effort to reduce the problem to an individual pathology but rather highlight the deep-seated nature of white supremacy. But sociologists have been reluctant to study the addictive qualities related to identity formation and change and the social significance of hate.

Why would hate result in consequences so severe that former white supremacists use the term addiction to describe their struggles? In truth, we are only beginning to learn about the neurocognitive dynamics related to involuntary and unwanted aspects of a past identity. We think two factors are especially important for understanding what generates these addiction-like qualities among former white supremacists.

First, white supremacy involves a totalizing, all-encompassing lifestyle that typically dominates everything from their thoughts, feelings, and relationships to their selection of television shows, music and even food they consume. In short, becoming a white supremacist is a complete identity transformation similar to what has previously been described in relation to drug and alcohol addiction.



“20170815DefendCville027” by sarah-ji is licensed under CC BY NC SA 2.0

Second, extreme hatred is characterized by rigid boundaries of “us” and “them” and various types of dehumanization. Identities, like white supremacy, that involve extreme hatred related to group-based prejudices, are likely to produce long-term neurophysiological consequences.

The routinized and insular nature of white supremacy along with the focus on extreme hatred produces an identity that may be much harder to leave behind than previously thought. In this sense, disengagement is not really the end of that identity as a whole other layer of unwanted and involuntary thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, and behaviors may persist and continue to shape the person’s life.

Yet, the persistence of hate is not inevitable. The formers we interviewed also devised extensive self-talk strategies to respond to the sudden resurfacing of their previous identity as a white supremacist. Self-talk is part of a larger process of learning new ways to act by reminding themselves that their past need not be their current or future self.

Self-talk represents an internal dialogue and allows formers to suppress manifestations of a self they no longer embrace. Instances of self-talk may contribute to a person’s sense of self efficacy by cumulatively demonstrating their ability to initiate change.

While we do not endorse the idea, “once a hater, always a hater,” there may be shreds of truth in this statement in that any kind of powerful identity will leave traces on the remainder of a person’s life. The point is not that change is impossible but rather transformation is rarely complete and past identities linger while continuing to shape future selves. It is much better for individuals to understand how these past identities may continue to shape their lives rather than remain oblivious and unaware of these influences.

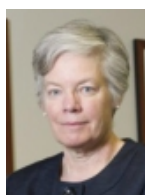
- This article is based on the paper, *‘Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists’* in the *American Sociological Review*.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2wKHkJD>

About the authors

**Kathleen Blee** – *University of Pittsburgh*

[Kathleen Blee](#) is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. She has written extensively about organized white supremacy, including *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* and *Women in the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, as well as methodological approaches and the politics and ethics of studying racist hate groups and strategies for combatting racial hate.

**Matthew DeMichele** – *Research Triangle Institute*

Matthew DeMichele is a Senior Research Sociologist at the Research Triangle Institute, where he conducts research on correctional population trends, risk prediction, criminal behavior, community corrections, terrorism/extremism, and program evaluation. He is currently leading research projects for federal and local governments, and for private foundations. DeMichele has several technical reports and policy briefs as well as publications appearing in *Crime and Delinquency*, *Theoretical Criminology*, and *Criminology and Public Policy*.

**Pete Simi** – *Chapman University*

Pete Simi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Director of the Earl Babbie Research Center at Chapman University. He has published widely on the issues of political violence, social movements, and street gangs.

**Steven Windisch** – *University of Nebraska Omaha*

Steven Windisch is a 3rd year doctoral student in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska Omaha. His research interests include domestic terrorism, extremist radicalization, violence, street gangs, collective behavior, social movements and qualitative research methods.